

North Korea Presents Only Bad Options

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Making foreign policy is often a matter of choosing the least bad from a list of bad options. No case illustrates this principle better than America's North Korea problem. To forestall North Korea from achieving a nuclear missile capability, there are basically six options. All have serious downsides.

1. Let China do it. As a candidate, Donald Trump said China has the leverage to change North Korean policy, so the solution is for Washington to pressure China to get Kim to stop developing missiles and nuclear weapons. But US officials discovered years ago that while China doesn't want North Korea to have deliverable nuclear weapons, what the Chinese fear even more is a collapse of the North Korean government, because this would create multiple serious problems for China. So China will never push Pyongyang so hard on nukes as to endanger the regime. It now appears Pyongyang is so committed to keeping its nuclear weapons that only immense pressure, with the risk of toppling the regime, would suffice. China won't go along.

2. Use military force. US forces could attempt to destroy North Korean nuclear weapon and missile production and testing facilities in a surgical strike, but there are three huge problems. The first is the likely creation of widespread and long-term nuclear contamination as radiological material is scattered by explosions. This would harm not only ordinary North Koreans but probably nearby countries as well, and make parts of the Korean peninsula uninhabitable for generations. Second, US strikes would not be able to destroy all of the facilities and stockpiles of bombs and missiles because much is dispersed and well-hidden. Third, there is too much chance this action would trigger a full-on war with North Korea, leading immediately to the destruction of Seoul and the requirement for South Korea and the United States to invade and occupy North Korea. South Koreans are understandably averse to another war and to paying the cost of rebuilding the northern half of the Peninsula.

3. Apply tougher economic sanctions. Up to now, increasingly-tough sanctions have not forced North Korea to halt its weapons programs for two reasons. First, China steps in to ensure North Korea does not suffer excessive hardship. The Chinese have always reserved the right to disregard sanctions for "humanitarian" purposes, even if the real reason is to prevent regime collapse. Second, it may simply be impossible for the outside world to impose enough economic pain on the North Korean government to force it to give up its aspiration to deploy nuclear missiles. Becoming a nuclear weapons state has huge domestic political significance for the regime, and Pyongyang seems convinced it would change North Korea's international fortunes as well.

4. Negotiate a "freeze." North Korea might agree to a deal to halt further progress on developing a nuclear missile. A first problem, however, is what Pyongyang would require of the USA as part of such a deal. At minimum, the regime would demand recognition as a nuclear weapon state. Washington has refused this recognition up to now because granting it would be a betrayal of allies South Korea and Japan. Pyongyang would probably have other demands, as well, likely including impossibilities such as US military forces pulling out of South Korea and the United States giving up its own nuclear arsenal. A second problem would be verifiability. Real verification requires that a country agree to anytime, anywhere inspections on demand. There is virtually zero chance that the reclusive and paranoid Pyongyang regime would agree to this. Finally, such a deal would only appeal to the United States if North Korea's capabilities were frozen at a level where North Korea could not threaten the US homeland. But that would not appeal to the North Koreans, since

being able to threaten the US homeland is their goal.

5. Accept North Korea into the club. The United States currently refuses to negotiate unless Pyongyang says it is willing to discuss de-nuclearizing, to which it conditionally agreed in 2005. Alternatively, Washington could hit the “reset” button: acknowledge that North Korea has nuclear weapons, perhaps speak in more neutral rather than adversarial terms about the regime, and open talks about normalizing the relationship and defusing tensions. Some observers argue North Korean behavior is based on legitimate fears of American hostility, and would act differently if the North Koreans perceived a less hostile American approach. Making nice and offering unilateral concessions to Kim, however, is probably not politically possible for a US president. It would legitimize Kim’s criminal international and domestic behavior, undermine attempts to limit global nuclear weapons proliferation, fatally damage any remaining American claim to moral leadership, and hang our South Korean and Japanese allies out to dry. Many American elites, including many members of Congress, would revolt against such a policy. Moreover, it is not clear the regime even wants to defuse tensions. Kim uses the image of an implacable American enemy to keep himself in power.

6. Stay the course. We continue waiting for the Kim regime to either collapse or renounce its nuclear weapons, while helping strengthen South Korea to deter possible North Korean military attacks. If and when North Korea demonstrates a nuclear missile capability, we strengthen anti-missile defenses and remind Pyongyang that their use of a nuclear weapon will result in the destruction of the regime and the extinction of North Korea as an independent state. This option rests on the realization that the Kim regime, while ruthless, is not suicidal.

In my view, option no. 6 is the least bad and the most likely choice by Washington.

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